



As human beings, I think that one of our worst temptations, one that we can probably all agree on, one that so often gets in the way of our ability to love one another, is our tendency to judge one another. Psychologists tell us that we form impressions of strangers in mere seconds, long before we know anything about them.

We pride ourselves on being good judges of character. We pretend that we have everything we need to decide who's good and who's bad, who's safe and who's dangerous, who's lying and who's not. It's one of our deepest instinctual habits to judge before we understand, to label before we listen. And psychologists also tell us why.

Judging others can help us to feel safe and feel in control. It feeds our self-esteem by helping us to feel superior. It gives us a sense of identity and helps us to make sense of the world. And it's rather effortless. In fact, judging others is one of the easiest ways to avoid the hard work of following Jesus.

Because once we've judged somebody as guilty, once we've decided that, you know, they only have themselves to blame, that it's their fault and not ours, it becomes so much easier to look the other way, to detach ourselves, to write them off, to no longer feel guilty for not helping. And it opens the door, I think, to another of our destructive impulses, that is our need to retaliate, to strike back, to punish, to make someone pay for what we think they've done.

Retribution, revenge, cutting people off, casting people out, all variations of the same instinct. You hurt me, I hurt you. Tit for tat, eye for an eye. Judgment and retribution, two sides of a coin, two instincts so deeply ingrained in us that we even ascribe them sometimes to God. And if you have any doubt, look no further than today's parable, which many of us might hear as, as God threatening people courtroom style, separating people as wheat or weeds, good or bad, and tossing the bad into an eternal fire.

"You Are The Pearl"- The Ninth Sunday After Pentecost 7/26/26

To which I have to ask, how would any of that be good news? Isn't it basically what I've just been describing? How would it be good news to learn that God is, is just another judge for us to worry about? Sorting people into piles, keeping some, discarding others. Wouldn't that leave many of us forever worried that we might not make the cut, that we might not measure up?

Whatever happened to God's infinite mercy? Whatever happened to Jesus who said, "I came not to judge, but to save"? And how would that work anyway? I mean, haven't most of us by now learned that people just aren't as simple as that? That none of us are entirely good or entirely bad. How often have we noticed, for example, that just when we're about to write somebody off as being a vicious bully, that we learn that they themselves have been abused since they were a child and they know no other way?

Just when we want to convict somebody as a thief and throw the book at them, we discover how desperate they have become to feed their family. And then we start to ask, how did we ever let it get so bad? It's never black and white. We always have layers upon layers of complexity, wounds, fears, family histories, traumas, hidden pressures.

And many of us aren't always aware of it because they're sometimes psychological, neurological, biochemical, genetic, even cultural, and they all combine to shape our actions, sometimes for good and sometimes for ill. What looks like arrogance on the outside might actually be self-doubt on the inside. What looks like a lack of sympathy may actually be emotional exhaustion.

What looks like anger can often be grief in disguise. We are all a mixed bag driven by mixed motives, and it's hard to always know. This is why I like-- I actually like the way the Episcopal Church talks about sin. When we do, that is. Not as a list of bad behaviors to avoid or to say sorry for when we don't, but more like it's a perpetual condition that afflicts us all, causing us all to fall short at times, to make choices that we regret, to say things we wish we hadn't, to take shortcuts to get ahead.

I think this is why one of the church's earliest theologians, Origen of Alexandria, as far back as the third century, read this parable not as a story about the world out there, but about the world in here. Not a parable about two types of people, but about the competing motivations we all carry within us. The wheat being the image of God planted within us all, our capacity to love, our capacity to offer compassion, to forgive, our willingness to sacrifice for the sake of others. And the weeds, everything that

"You Are The Pearl"- The Ninth Sunday After Pentecost 7/26/26

threatens to choke off that human possibility. Our pride, our ego, self-centeredness, destructive habits- you name it; the list goes on and on.

Even Matthew in his explanation says, "Every cause of sin." Which also explains the reaction of the servants, whose first thought is to rush into the field and pull out every weed they can find. But Jesus says, "No. Let them grow together," he says. And I'm not sure we really appreciate just how radical that notion is because most of us, I think, are probably a bit like the servants, aren't we? We wanna do just the opposite. We wanna improve ourselves. We wanna fix our faults. We wanna change our bad habits. And yet Jesus says no, because it turns out that we just aren't very good at it. According to the parable, we have a hard time distinguishing the difference between a weed and the wheat. And I wonder, you know, can you think of an example of that in your own life?

An aspect of yourself that you may have spent years trying to change, tendencies you've tried to stop, parts of you that you were once ashamed of, that you've now come to see as a gift I have a friend, a dear friend, who is a self-described introvert, and she often talks about how, you know, she always wished that she was more outgoing, more gregarious. Meanwhile, I was always telling her, "You know, Christine, do you realize how wonderful it is to talk to you? Because unlike pretty much everyone else I'm talking to most of the time, you're not sitting there scrolling your phone, multitasking. You actually listen." And that is such a simple but amazing gift Or how about, you know, being gay? Or any of the other letters of that alphabet, or for that matter, any other part of you that ever made you feel different. Something about you that kept you feeling like an outsider in your own community, maybe even in your own home. How many of us wanted to, wanted to pull out that part of ourselves like a weed?

As something that we were ashamed of, or something that we wish we could be cured of. And yet today, with the grace of God and the support of a blessed family of faithful, we are starting to see that all of our diversities as the gifts of God that they've always been ever since. And the examples, I think, are endless. And so I find this parable to be comforting. Because like many of you, you know, I grew up thinking that in order to be loved and accepted, I would need to get rid of my faults. I would need to fix my many flaws, my many, many flaws, as I look back at my colleagues. And trust me, I have a absurdly large library of self-help books at home to show for it.

Sure, you know, we can make some progress with God's help. We can become more intentional. We can practice thinking before we speak. We can try to reflect and

"You Are The Pearl"- The Ninth Sunday After Pentecost 7/26/26

pray before we accuse. But it always seems to be, at best, a work in progress. Because if you're like me, it doesn't take much to lapse back into our old habits, and when we do, we can become discouraged, we can get down on ourselves, we can even stop liking ourselves over time.

Or we can, you know, just go the other way, live in denial, pretend like we have no flaws, and go around boasting about how wonderful we are and how glorious our life is, all while exhausting ourselves trying to keep up the act. Either way, whether it's trying to uproot or deny, it only leads to more perfectionism, more frustration, and anger. Anger with God, anger with others, anger with ourselves. Jesus, I think, wants us to know that if we can't accept ourselves, weeds and all, one way or another, we are going to spend our whole life uprooting ourselves. And so he says, "Don't do that. Let them grow together." Accepting your flaws, accepting your shortcomings, perceived or real, is important because it's the only path to accepting ourselves, and accepting ourselves is the only way that we can begin to truly accept others.

The great commandment, if you will And to be clear, by acceptance I'm not, I'm not suggesting that we should give our, let ourselves off the hook, you know? When we are selfish or cruel, acceptance is not a free pass to be a jerk. It's actually the opposite. It's about finding the humility so that we can actually do the hard work of owning up and saying, "I'm sorry."

Acceptance means getting off the judgment seat long enough to see our part in it, to see what we said and to say, "You know, I'm sorry. That is not who I am. That was not me at my best self." When we can accept ourselves long enough to own up to our mistakes rather than hide behind judgment and anger, when we can start to accept the flaws of others, the world takes one more step toward the Kingdom of God on Earth as it is in Heaven Because as with so much of our life of faith, our work is to start living today as if tomorrow was already here. To wake up each morning and remind ourselves that, that God has you and will not let you go. That's what Paul says when he's talks about a spirit of adoption. It means God deliberately chose us, weeds and all. And so we don't have to uproot ourselves to earn God's love. We don't need to fix ourselves to be accepted, and that is good news because it frees us from that cycle of judgment and retribution If we can stop beating up on ourselves, maybe we can stop beating up on others, and instead start living, because God isn't finished with any of us.

The wheat is still growing within. The goodness God planted in every one of us is still taking root. That's the promise I hear Jesus making today, that in the fullness of time, I will sort it all out. You don't need to. I will burn away all that has ever held you

"You Are The Pearl"- The Ninth Sunday After Pentecost 7/26/26

back, all that has ever kept you down, and I will raise you up as the real you, the complete you, the unhindered you, the unrestrained you. Yes. The you that has been there all along, and that I've loved since the beginning. That's the judgment that awaits. That's the heavenly banquet to which we will all have a seat. So let us have the courage then to live differently. Let us show the world what it looks like to resist the rusted judge, to resist the urge to retaliate, to resist the temptation to pull up what God has planted, and instead, let us instead embrace ourselves and embrace one another, weeds and all.

Amen.